

Averting Child Marriage during COVID-19:

A Factsheet and Action Plan

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KEY MESSAGES

- Interventions were most successful when they occurred early in the decision-making process, before marriage preparations were underway. Of successfully averted cases, 65% were in the “decision phase,” when parents had made up their minds to get their children married and begun taking concrete steps to send and solicit proposals.
- Investing in local volunteers, leveraging their local knowledge, and helping them build trust in the community is crucial to building an early warning system. In 93% of cases, volunteers were informed of impending marriages by community members, including relatives and neighbours of the family.
- Volunteers were trusted because they had worked with families on a breadth of issues, such as helping families apply for credit, enrolling children in schools, and linking them with local officials to whom they did not have prior access. Having built up their credibility and demonstrated that they had the best interests of the child at heart, they were able to negotiate with families to delay early marriages.
- Peer networks can help young girls identify supporters. In 8% of cases, the at-risk girls themselves reported the planning of their marriages to their peers who were conducting safety sessions on child marriage with Aangan.
- A multi-stakeholder approach in which local officials and community members are activated can create a large network of allies and create barriers to early marriage. In 68% of cases, women volunteers actively worked with other members of the community, including local government (mukhiyas and sarpanches), men’s groups, ASHA and Aanganwadi sevikas, school principals, etc., to detect and avert marriages.
- Enhancing girls’ preparedness increased chances of success. Safety sessions with girls went beyond awareness building. Girls created personal safety plans to identify allies and adults to approach in times of crisis. They were also trained in negotiation skills and made to rehearse negotiation sessions. In 89 percent of cases, volunteers adopted negotiation with the girls’ families as the primary strategy. In 7 cases, girls themselves successfully negotiated with their families to avert their own and their siblings’ marriages.
- Pre-emptive engagement with non-traditional stakeholders such as self-help groups, wedding vendors, and men’s groups can defray the financial and social costs that force families into considering child marriage. Over 53% of cases in Patna were stopped with the support of Jeevika self-help groups, who provided income-generating loans and connected families to alternative livelihood opportunities so that they did not have to pursue the marriage of their child.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on socio-economically disadvantaged children in India. The public health crisis and its attendant economic shocks have not only exacerbated the main drivers of child marriage, labour, and trafficking, but have also forced civil society and humanitarian organizations to rethink their approach towards child protection.

Aangan has been active across the country during COVID-19 through its volunteers, strengthening the ability of vulnerable children and families to protect themselves from violence and exploitation. **During COVID-19, our volunteers were able to avert 211 cases of child marriage across five states** (see Figure 1). In this factsheet, we document these efforts and strategies in order to build a case for preventative and community-based approaches to child protection. By showcasing what worked and what didn't, we hope to share best practices and engage with other actors working in this space. To that end, we welcome feedback and comments at act@aanganindia.org.

District, State ¹	Children whose marriages were successfully averted
Patna, Bihar	176 girls, 2 boys
Bharatpur, Rajasthan	22 girls, 3 boys
North 24 Paragnas, West Bengal	4 girls, 1 boy
Pakur, Jharkhand	2 girls
Mumbai, Maharashtra	1 girl

Figure 1: Child marriages averted by Aangan during COVID-19

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT: COVID-19

Emergencies such as natural disasters and conflicts have long been linked to child marriage as a negative coping mechanism. COVID-19 is no exception. Save the Children estimates a dramatic surge in child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. Up to 2.5 million additional girls are at a high risk of marriage within the next five years, with the largest number of marriages expected to be in South Asia.³

Indian activists and civil society members have warned of increased child marriages since the first few months of the lockdown, linking it to the financial insecurity caused by the loss of livelihoods, loss of access to many social security schemes, increasing food insecurity, and the closure of schools. Lower dowry demands and lower marriage expenses due to the lockdown further incentivized families who were already considering child marriage as a coping strategy. This rise in child marriage was accompanied by related child protection issues such as domestic violence and trafficking, as well as by the decreased ability of non-profit and humanitarian organizations to travel and provide services.

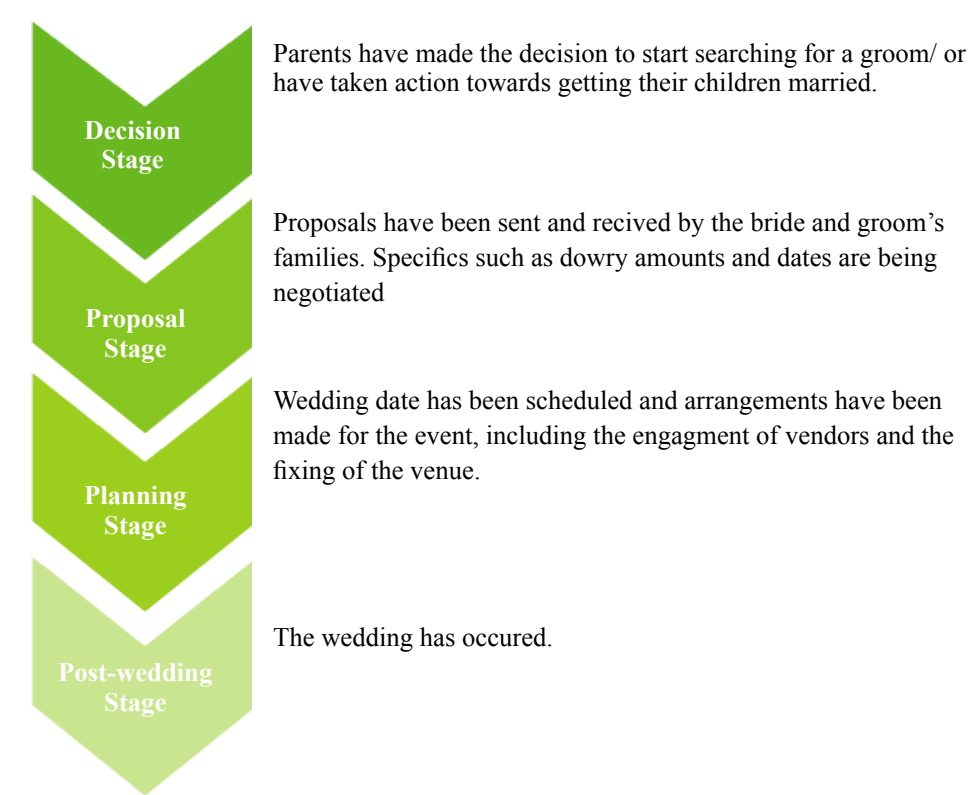


Figure 2.1: Stages of the child marriage decision-making process

¹Note: All 211 child marriage cases are from districts where Aangan runs its Hotspot program. Others than these five districts, Aangan also works in Varansi, Uttar Pradesh.

²Danielle Spencer, "To Protect Her Honour: Child Marriage in Emergencies," Gender and Protection in Humanitarian Contexts: Critical Issues Series (UK: CARE International, May 2015), [https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE Child-marriage-in-emergencies_2015.pdf](https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE%20Child-marriage-in-emergencies_2015.pdf).

SHARE OF CHILD MARRIAGE STAGES IN AANGAN'S SUCCESSFUL CASES

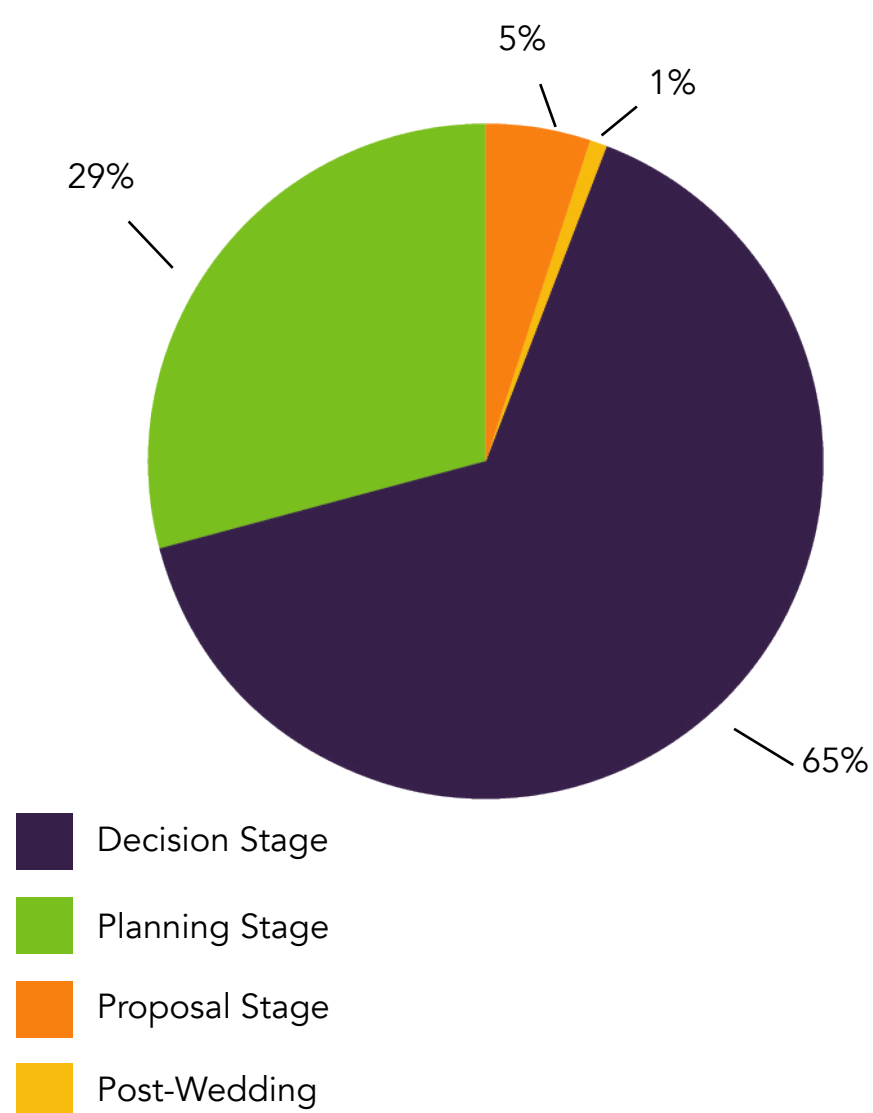


Figure 2.2

AANGAN'S PREVENTATIVE AND COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH

The child protection crisis precipitated by COVID-19 demonstrates the usefulness of a preventative approach that aims to gradually build up community support and capacity. Preventing harm before it occurs is crucial. Girls who are married as children are more vulnerable to domestic violence, social isolation, and health risks, particularly relating to sexual and reproductive diseases. Annulments are rare because of a fear of punitive action against the families. Redressal procedures fail to understand the extent of the trauma faced by those who were married as children. Preventative action, on the other hand, both protects individual children

and can lead to a gradual transformation of the social norms that place children in harm's way. Aangan has found that its interventions during COVID-19 were most successful when they were early. Figure 2 shows the different stages of child marriage and the percentage of our successful interventions that occurred during each stage. **Almost two-thirds of the successes were during the decision phase, when parents were thinking of getting the child married but had not yet made concrete plans.** Another 29 percent occurred in the proposal phase, when marriage proposals had been sent but specific details such as dowry amounts and wedding dates were still being negotiated. Another five percent were halted in the planning phase, when wedding arrangements had been made. Aangan's volunteers found that strategies of negotiation and dialogue were far more likely to work when the wedding was yet to occur. In the two cases in which the wedding was annulled after the fact, police officials had to be involved.

It is in service of preventative action that community embeddedness and investment in local capacity is a key parts of Aangan's volunteers were informed early on by members of the community or by the girls themselves, enhancing their ability to intervene. Because of the trust they had built through their prior work in the community, Aangan's women volunteers were able to leverage their position to negotiate with families, help them seek other options for financial security, and help girls exercise agency in preventing their own marriage. We found that no success came easy and there was no single strategy—local conditions, the ability to rally community members, and the specifics of each case drove the responses in different directions.

Aangan remained in constant contact with its volunteers, running online training sessions on family violence for over 2,400 volunteers, strategizing responses to specific cases, coordinating with police, and more. **The importance of smartphones in facilitating this process cannot be overstated.** Without access to smartphones through which

³ Gabrielle Szabo and Jess Edwards, "The Global Girlhood Report 2020: How COVID-19-19 Is Putting Progress in Peril" (Save the Children, October 2020), https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18201/pdf/global_girlhood_report_2020_africa_version_2.pdf.

⁴ Lalita Panicker, "COVID-19 Has Led to a Rise in Child Marriages," Hindustan Times, December 26, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/COVID-19-19-has-led-to-a-rise-in-child-marriages/story-G7ocQKTiERb7tBPxdaWhhM.html>.

⁵ Nupur Dogra, "Are Pandemic Induced Child Marriages a Wakeup Call for India?," TheLeaflet, July 28, 2020, sec. Child Rights, <https://www.theleaflet.in/are-pandemic-induced-child-marriages-a-wakeup-call-for-india/>.

instant messaging, videochats, and conference calls were possible, local volunteers would have found themselves unable to access COVID - specific trainings, information about new government schemes, access to local officials, and support and assistance from non-profits such as Childline and from other Aangan volunteers and staff. **Although the pandemic introduced these virtual activities out of necessity, it is ushering in a new era in which technology could increase the efficiency and geographical reach of organizations such as ours.**

Through interviews with Aangan’s volunteers and case studies of averted child marriages during COVID-19, we argue for a multi-pronged approach, combining different actions and multiple stakeholders. To that end, we advocate *four core strategies*:

01

INVESTMENT IN LOCAL VOLUNTEERS

02

BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

03

NEGOTIATION & DIALOGUE

04

CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH NON-TRADITIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

Each of the following sections describes the specific tactics used as well as their aims, results, and successes during COVID-19. We include stories from the ground, negotiation strategies, and examples of community engagement in the hope that they will provide useful ideas for others working in child protection and inspire similar approaches.

STRATEGY I: INVESTMENT IN LOCAL VOLUNTEERS

Key to Aangan's success has been the leadership of local women volunteers. Volunteers drawn from the community come equipped with hyperlocal knowledge, heightening their ability to detect impending child marriages. Working closely with them, we were able to build a local knowledge base that allowed volunteers to anticipate risks early and know which stakeholders to engage with. When the nationwide lockdown prohibited travel, local volunteers sprang into action.

BUILD HYPERLOCAL KNOWLEDGE TO ENHANCE THE ABILITY TO ANTICIPATE RISKS

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, Aangan had trained 9,000 women volunteers across 9 states to combat child protection issues. This included increasing awareness of child protection, training women on the technical aspects of child protection such as negotiation, and connecting them with other local stakeholders such as government systems and police. In addition to merely contracting and training local volunteers, Aangan sought to build their knowledge base such that the risk of child marriage could be better anticipated. Women volunteers collected household-level data on children's wellbeing and socioeconomic pressures. Over time, they built knowledge about macro trends such as the months in which child marriages tend to be concentrated, the months in which children are made to work, and what times of day children are left unsupervised. They even conducted safety mapping sessions in which children collaborated to map out the areas where they felt most unsafe.

When COVID-19 hit, the volunteers were equipped with both the conceptual and historical knowledge that crises and natural disasters are linked to negative coping mechanisms such as child marriage, as well as an understanding of how this dynamic was playing out in their own communities. **Especially important because of the economic crisis spurred by COVID-19 is the consideration of dowry and wedding costs. During the lockdown, wedding costs were**

considerably lower due to restrictions on the number of guests. Additionally, dowry demands were decreased. In some districts of Bihar, the dowry demand was only 25 percent of what it would have been – Rs. 30,000 versus an average of Rs. 1,25,000. These "savings" incentivized more parents to marry off their children. By speaking to neighbours and community members, volunteers identified this trend as well as how gaps in the mid-day meal program, the closure of schools, the increased burden of household chores for girls, and the fear that parents had of girls engaging in online relationships were leading to an increased risk of child marriage.

USE LOCAL KNOWLEDGE TO IDENTIFY ALLIES AND STAKEHOLDERS

Hyperlocal knowledge is also useful in identifying allies and targets in an intervention. For example, one of our volunteers from Minakhan, West Bengal said that during COVID-19, **"The fathers in the village are keen to get their daughters married off. The mothers are reluctant, because so many of them were child brides themselves. However, the decision of the mother is not given much importance in their families."** This information was crucial in determining how to approach the mother and enlist her support, while placing other pressures on the father. Because of similar findings in Patna, our child protection volunteer Julie decided to visit the mother of Gauri Kumari and discuss the potential harms to her daughter such as early pregnancy and abandonment. She had regular conversations with her mother and was able to convince her not to pursue the marriage and to strategize about other ways to mitigate their financial stress. Gauri's father, however, was not convinced. In the proposal stage, Gauri's mother took a stand and rejected the proposal, lying to her husband that other women had mentioned issues with the groom's family. The right ally can thus be instrumental. Similarly, as detailed later in Strategy III, volunteers were able to gauge cases in which the fathers held the decision-making power and were unlikely to be convinced by the volunteer.



To negotiate with the father, they involved local officials like the mukhiya as well as local men's groups. In districts like Bharatpur and Patna, volunteers focused their efforts on activating the police. **In Bharatpur, they managed to secure increased police patrolling at the time of muhurtams (the start of Hindu marriage ceremonies) and checks of wedding pandals under the pretext of distributing masks.** They were able to stop eight cases of child marriage. Building this knowledge of local actors is a time-intensive and effortful investment, but one that has consistently yielded results. It is only through volunteers who are committed and familiar with local dynamics that such a nuanced approach is possible.

STRATEGY II: BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Strong and supportive social networks provide significant advantages to child protection interventions. One of Aangan’s main strategies is to help local women make linkages and demonstrate that volunteers have the best interests of the child and the family at heart, thereby building their social capital. Right from the beginning, volunteers support families in different ways such as securing documentation, getting the children admission in schools, and helping parents source loans. During COVID-19, they helped families get rations and avail of other public schemes. This helped them to gain trust, respect, and credibility in the community, which was useful when they tried to mobilize locals and intervene in child protection cases. Moreover, they also built social capital across the community so as to help girls identify supporters and seek recourse. Safety training sessions for adolescents specifically aimed to build their networks and introduce them face-to-face to community members who were previously inaccessible to girls and women such as panchayat members and police. The PACT program specifically focuses on building women’s trust in state actors by hosting open houses at police thaanas, having sessions where women interface

with local officials, and having these community members describe reporting mechanisms and assure girls of their support.

BUILD EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS

For a preventative approach to work, the alert must be sounded early. By building a social network and designating the local volunteer as the node for child protection work, Aangan volunteers were able to receive information about impending marriages quickly and from varied sources. **Strikingly, in over 93 percent of cases, the volunteers were warned of impending marriages through informal and indirect reports by community members.** Out of this, 17 percent of the warnings came by relatives and neighbours, and 69 percent came from peer women from “whisper circles.”

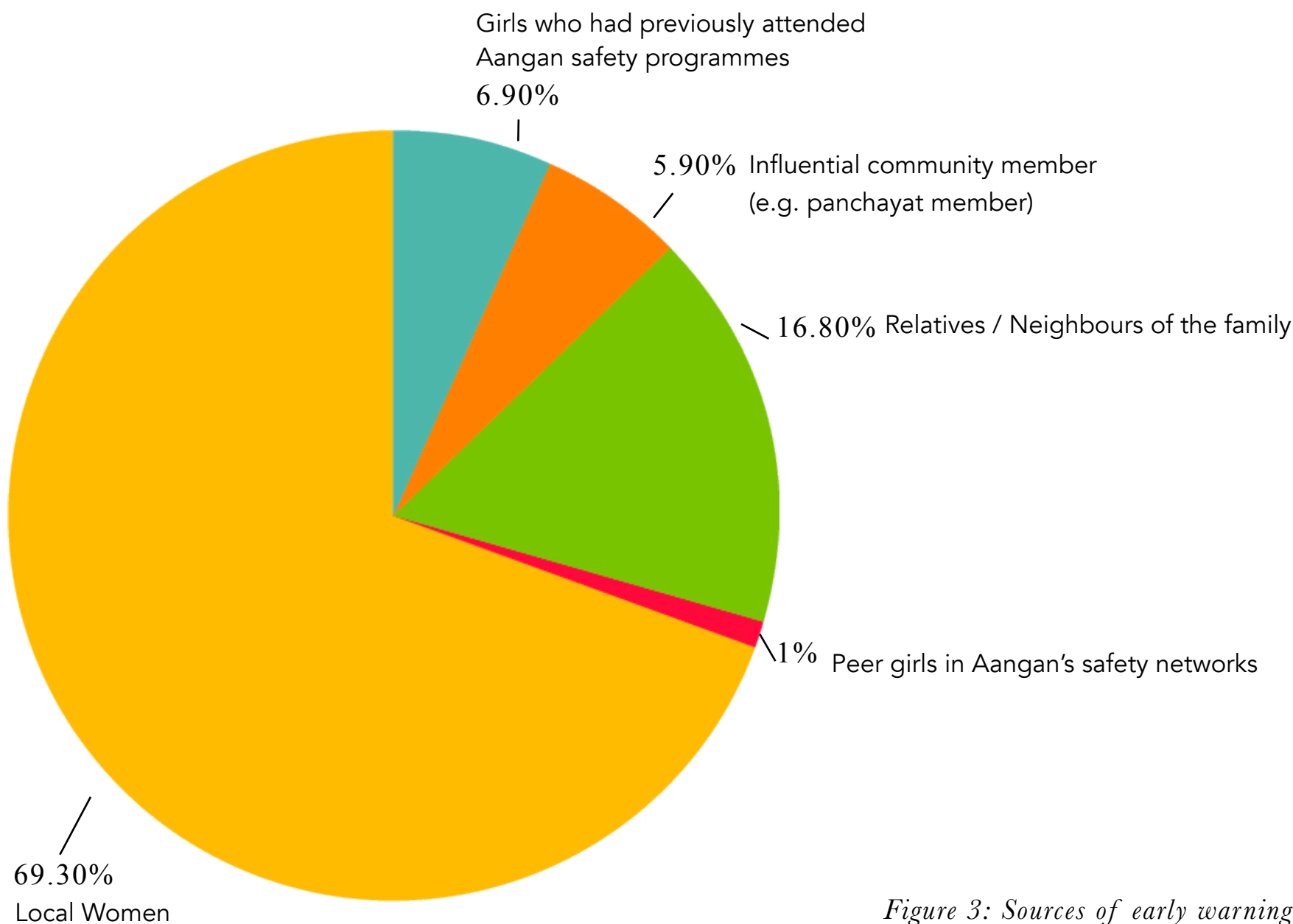


Figure 3: Sources of early warnings



During the lockdown, there was a drastic spike in domestic violence. In response, Aangan conducted virtual trainings for 2,407 volunteers on strategies to detect and reduce family violence in their own communities. The volunteers, in turn, set up **‘whisper circles’** — clusters of local women who would meet regularly to receive training in responding to calls for help and ensuring preparedness in the case of domestic violence. When those women heard rumours of child marriage or domestic violence, they would immediately flag the issues to the volunteer. This way, the whisper circle network became a strong early warning system.

In 8 percent of cases, the at-risk girls themselves reported the planning of their marriages to volunteers or to alumni girls who had participated in Aangan programs. In the case of Jaya and Rani Shukla, for example, the girls were part of the Super Smart Shakti networks (girl safety networks run by women volunteers trained by Aangan). Even after they finished the program, they remained in touch with the volunteers and each other through “alumni networks.” This social network provided them recourse when they were in danger of being married and it helped connect them to trusted adults and peers. They immediately informed the alumni girls and sought help. The work of alumni girls, in particular, shows the positive effects of the diffusion of social capital in the community. They demonstrated agency in organizing and running small discussion circles with other adolescent girls about child marriage. It was during these conversations between peers that 15 cases of impending marriage were identified, upon which they informed the volunteers.

INVOLVE AND TRAIN THE COMMUNITY IN ORDER TO INCREASE COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP OF CHILD PROTECTION

Mukund Singh, a Patna local, says, “Men’s groups in our community are aware and on the lookout for signs of early marriage. As soon as we get information about any child marriage talks in the family, we immediately contact Mukhiyaji. He personally comes and visits the family to convince the parents to stop the child marriage. We have decided that we will not let even one child marriage take place in our community this year.”

Community ownership of child protection is essential to bringing about sustained and long-term change. In 68 percent of cases, women volunteers actively worked with other members of the community to prevent child marriage. Volunteers in Bharatpur activated men’s groups, asking them to be vigilant and obtaining commitments from 167 fathers and 62 brothers that they would not push their daughters and sisters into early marriages. Networks of alumni girls were revived and trained, as were aanganwadi sevikas and ASHA workers, to recognize early warning signs of marriage such as (1) wedding shopping by the family, (2) dowry items being arranged at home, (3) guests visiting the peer girl’s house/ extended family visits and meetings, (4) big utensils that are usually used to cater to the wedding guests, and (5)

conversations heard/overheard by girls themselves. In North 24 Parganas and Pakur, volunteers received support from Block Development Officers, Child Marriage Prevention Officers, panchayat members, and mukhiyas while negotiating with the family.

Patna provides a case study in the effectiveness of community ownership of child protection. Mukhiyas and ward members pressured pandits and wedding decorators to stop providing their services at weddings involving minors. Volunteers worked with Aanganwadi sevikas and ASHA workers and asked them to keep an eye out for signs of child marriage while conducting their door-to-door services. One wedding decorator said, “When customers come to my shop to buy wedding decoration items, I ask to see the Aadhar card copies of the bride and groom before selling anything. I also talk to the customers about the negative effects of child marriage and explain that together we’ve decided to keep children safe from early marriage.” Thus, cultivating trust, networks, and ownership ahead of crises increases the effectiveness of child protection interventions and makes community mobilization a quick and viable strategy.

STRATEGY III: NEGOTIATION AND DIALOGUE

Negotiation and dialogue are critical determinants of success in child marriage prevention. We find that negotiating with relevant parties, most often parents, in order to find mutually beneficial solutions is far more effective as a long-term strategy than forcibly intervening with the help of police or other officials. **An Aangan study found that prior to safety and negotiation training sessions, only 36% of girls took part in household decision-making, whereas in a follow-up study after the session, over 66% took part in household decisions.**

Dialogue with the decision-makers in the household is key to this process. Women volunteers would have multiple rounds of conversation with both parents in order to convince them to delay the marriage. Although most parents know about laws against child marriage, many do not believe that officials will take it seriously, a piece of information that volunteers repeatedly stressed to them. In Pakur, Jharkhand, the parents of a little girl Jyoti were told about a case in an adjacent village where police had intervened and arrested both the parents and the in-laws of the bride. Jyoti's parents heeded the warning, realizing that the issue would not be ignored by officials, and cancelled the marriage. Other considerations that volunteers brought up in these dialogues was that of increased health risks, especially reproductive health, and risks of gender-based violence.

In 89 percent of cases, women volunteers adopted negotiation with the girls' families as the primary strategy. Since most parents were marrying their children off due to socioeconomic pressures, volunteers worked with them to secure rations, loans, and other benefits in exchange for promises to halt or delay the marriage. Importantly, in 7 powerful cases, girls themselves led successful negotiations with their parents in order to avert their own and their siblings' marriages. Through such negotiations, the interventions tend to be more sustainable in the long-run because they try to address the underlying structural problems — financial constraints, gender norms — while also obtaining short-term guarantees against the marriage.

INCREASE AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS THROUGH NEGOTIATION

“If I had not gathered the courage and refused to marry, then I would have been married today.” – Payal, from Bharatpur

A vast majority of scholarship and child protection interventions assume that at-risk girls themselves have no say but our experience contradicts this assumption. **To that end, one of Aangan's main strategies is to build negotiation skills in young girls.** Through the Super Smart Shakti networks, Aangan volunteers had run sessions on rights, laws, risks linked to child marriage, and the importance of education and financial independence. They also ran negotiation sessions where girls rehearsed negotiation strategies and created personal safety plans to identify who to approach in times of crisis. Jayanti, a young girl from Naubatpur, used the negotiation strategies she had learned in the Super Smart Shakti sessions and asserted the desires of her and her sister to keep studying and becoming financial independent before getting married. Her arguments were so convincing that her mother agreed to delay the marriage. Unfortunately, their father did not and the girls had to approach Aangan volunteers for further help.

Payal, quoted above, attended a police open house organized by Aangan where they went through reporting mechanisms. She wrote a letter to the police about her impending marriage. Upon receiving a response from the police who assured her that they would get local officials involved and link their family with public schemes, Payal powerfully stood up against her mother's decision. She confidently negotiated with her mother, telling her that getting married before 18 is illegal and that she does not intend to get married before becoming financial independent. She even reached out to the sarpanch to voice concerns about the lack of vocational training centers, which would help her increase her earnings since she has dropped out of school. Aangan volunteers are now linking the family



with the Mukhyamantri Palanhar scheme, which provides financial assistance to vulnerable children and mandates that children be sent to Aanganwadi centers and schools. **The agency that these girls demonstrated in articulating their own wishes, standing up to their parents, and cleverly strategizing is inspiring and points to the beginnings of a lifelong habit of self-reliance.**

This empowerment has important ripple effects. Payal, for example, not only protected herself but also her younger sister, who is now able to continue her education with the monthly Rs. 1,000 and the annual subsidy of Rs. 2,000 for clothing and other necessities from the Mukhyamantri Palanhar scheme. In a similar case, Aafreen, a girl in Patna, negotiated with her parents and not only managed to avert her own marriage but also delayed her younger sister Fatima's marriage and ensured that Fatima also attended Aangan sessions and learned to negotiate for herself. Thus, girls' voices and choices are present and powerful. Although they are often constrained by patriarchal structures, with training and empowerment and in the presence of social support, girls are able to exercise their agency and create a tangible impact on their lives.

IDENTIFY THE STRONGEST NEGOTIATOR BASED ON SOCIAL NORMS AND LEVERAGE

Negotiations depend heavily on the characteristics,

credibility, and leverage of the negotiator. Depending on the family's beliefs and traditions as well as their socioeconomic conditions, it may be more helpful for volunteers to intervene rather than the girls themselves, or to enlist the support of local panchayat members and mukhiyas.

In 30 percent of cases, women volunteers involved men in the negotiations because they knew that men would have more credibility, and therefore success, while negotiating with the fathers who hold the decision-making power in many families. In Patna, volunteers enlisted the help of local men's groups to talk to the father. In Bharatpur, a volunteer involved her own husband, who successfully negotiated with the girl's father to delay the gauna even after the marriage had taken place. Often, volunteers had to involve local leaders and officials such as panchayat members and mukhiyas. In Pakur, the mukhiya, along with the volunteers, met with the parents for negotiations multiple times until he was sure that the family had cancelled the marriage. Knowledge of local dynamics helped volunteers maximize their leverage at the negotiating table by recruiting the help of other influential community members.

STRATEGY IV: CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH NON-TRADITIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

Prevention efforts centered solely around convincing the family of the consequences of child marriage are inadequate. Poverty and social pressures may force the hand of the family. In order to respond to the varied drivers of child marriage, Aangan sought to creatively engage with players who would not be considered traditional stakeholders in child protection. Our volunteers enlisted the support of Jeevika Self-Help Groups, school principals, ASHA and Aanganwadi sevikas, and more in order to devise ways by which to deter families from engaging in child marriage.

BUILD BARRIERS TO MARRIAGE

In the absence of successful dialogue with the family, it can be useful to create external hurdles that make child marriage tougher to go through with. In Bihar, the Jeevika programme has created over ten lakh self-help groups run by and for women. Some of Aangan's volunteers in Patna were also members of these SHGs and they entered into an informal agreements with other Jeevika members to ensure that they did not approve loans for the purpose of marriage of girls below the age of 18 years. This provides a good case study on how to build non-traditional barriers to marriage when negotiations fail.

Social barriers work as well as economic ones. As mentioned before, **volunteers activated other individuals who are involved in marriages, such as wedding decorators, pandits, caterers, maulawis, and mithaiwalas. They pledged not to perform any services at weddings with underage brides or grooms and to ask for identity documents when orders were placed so that they check their ages.** This social pressure worked in the case of volunteer Julie who had been in communication with thirteen-year-old Amisha Kumari's family for a long time but had not yet managed to convince them to delay the marriage. In their last conversation, she told the parents, "These days even the printers have been instructed by the Police and Mukhiyas to check for ID proof. When you go to the printer to print the wedding invitation cards, he is bound to ask for your daughter's age proof and this will get you in trouble". She also showed them photographs of a multi-

stakeholder meeting that involved police and community leaders, emphasizing that the community was alert and would take action if they found a case of child marriage. It was this conversation that finally convinced Amisha's father.

CREATE ALTERNATIVES FOR FINANCIAL SECURITY

Given the force of financial insecurity as a driving factor in child marriage, Aangan volunteers focus heavily on providing alternative sources of income or sustenance for families. In Bihar, volunteers were well aware of the economic impacts of COVID-19 and that most families had lost steady sources of income and were in dire need of financial assistance. Many families wanted to get their girls married because of the lower dowry demand and because they were struggling to cover their household expenses. In order to prevent this, volunteers worked with Jeevika SHGs to provide loan assistance (between Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 25,000) to start up small home-run businesses such as tailoring, stitching masks, and setting up a shop. Jeevikas helped connect women in the family with other temporary alternative livelihood opportunities. Strikingly, over 53% cases of child marriages that were stopped in Patna were stopped with the support of Jeevika SHGs.

Connecting individuals to social security schemes and helping them access government rations and services is a key component of this strategy. For example, in the case of Jaya and Rani Shukla mentioned above, Aangan volunteers helped them apply for ration and Aadhar cards during the lockdown so that they could access PDS, they opened a zero balance account at Bank of India, they helped Jaya apply for a scholarship, and helped the family secure MNREGA work. Now, the family has started receiving rations regularly, Jaya received a scholarship of Rs.8,000, and the parents have been receiving MNREGA payments directly into their bank account. Ganesh, the volunteer who led the charge in the Shuklas' case, also linked up with another Aangan volunteer connected to a Jeevika SHG and helped their mother receive a loan of Rs. 5,000 which helped them restart their agricultural work.

Creating alternative financial arrangements is imperative to success. The families of children at risk of child marriage are extremely economically-disadvantaged and many were daily wage labourers who lost all work during the lockdown. Many other volunteers shared information with families about financial schemes such as the Kanya Vivah Yojana and the Sukanya Samridhhi Yojana that would provide assistance to their children and allow them to continue their education. Others connected girls and families to skill development and vocational training programs like Jharkhand's Tejaswini program. Working to secure financial stability and financial independence is key to a future free of the threat of child marriage.

BUILD A COALITION TO DEFRAY THE PERCEIVED SOCIAL COSTS FOR THE FAMILY

Jaya and Rani's mother, when Ganesh asked why they were getting their daughters married, cited social pressure: "They are growing up. Neighbors and community members are wondering [why they are not getting married]. We don't want to miss such a good proposal in such trying times."

Another driver of child marriage is perceived social costs. If daughters grow too old, it is believed to reflect poorly on the family and it decreases her worth in the marriage market. In the case of Amisha Kumari, 13 years of age, her parents felt this pressure even earlier because Amisha because Amisha "looks old for her age." These perceived social costs can be countered by a concerted effort by members of the community to convince the family that they have their support and will not be ostracized for having an unmarried daughter. To that end, Aangan volunteers sought the help of community influencers or other local figures who may be seen by the families as authoritative or credible actors.

Volunteers across Aangan's sites managed to get commitments to rid communities of child marriage from the police, Aangwandi workers, men's groups, and local officials such as Station House Officers, Block Development Officers, and

Sarpanches. Local men's groups were very active. Kamalji from Lodhipur, Patna, shared, "As part of the men's group, I am regularly in touch with our village mukhiya and the police. I have worked with the women's group in our community to fight family violence. When I got to know about their work on preventing child marriages, I started supporting them in this cause." In a case in Bharatpur, the volunteer sought the support of the school principal, informing him that the family wanted the girl to drop out because of financial considerations. The principal immediately began to negotiate with the parents to delay the marriage. He sponsored Rs.1,000 himself, conditional on the parents allowing the girl to continue her education. Receiving these signals from influential members of the community can defray the social costs for the family and allow for the imagination of different futures for their children.

CHALLENGES FACED

Aangan volunteers received support from a large variety of actors but they faced their fair share of challenges along the way, as has been highlighted in each case study. Many families were not convinced easily and began avoiding the volunteers. Some families told volunteers that local customs were more important to them than the health and legal risks they were citing. Another source of resistance was local stakeholders. In a few cases, the locals showed reluctance to helping the volunteer. Most often, these locals were either related to the bride or groom or were convinced that early marriage would be beneficial for the family. In one case, there was also pressure from the volunteer's family to stop engaging in this work. In this case, the volunteer recruited the help of another volunteer in the Aangan network from a neighbouring community in Bharatpur and reported the case to Childline.

Time was the other constraint. There were instances in which volunteers found that weddings were planned overnight and they didn't have enough notice to intervene. In one such case, even though the volunteers weren't able to stop the marriage, they were able to get a commitment from the family to delay the gauna. In North 24 Parganas, particularly, there were cases of runaway marriages that volunteers were not able to prevent. In one such case, the police and the volunteers intervened after the fact and convinced the girl to return home.

ingenuity, were able to build resilience within the community such that they were not dependent on outside help to address their problems when COVID-19 hit. They show how, through investment in community capacity and preventative actions, we can lead sustained and transformative interventions to end child marriage.

CONCLUSION

Child marriage perpetuates a cycle of poverty and gender inequality, depriving children of their rights to education, to be free of work, and their fundamental right to a childhood. With the alarming spike in child marriages seen after the onset of COVID-19, it is essential that state and civil society organizations lead coordinated and collective action towards ending this practice. By documenting the approaches that have worked in this factsheet, we hope to share best practices, offer creative ideas, and advocate for a preventative community-based approach. Through their continued efforts, our women volunteers, who displayed incredible dedication and

